

Population Patterns in Pre-Confederation New Brunswick*

Graeme Wynn

Volume 10, Number 2, Spring 1981

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad10_2doc01

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Wynn, G. (1981). Population Patterns in Pre-Confederation New Brunswick*. *Acadiensis*, 10(2), 124–138.

Documents

Population Patterns in Pre-Confederation New Brunswick*

Although few geographers would go as far as Derwent Whittlesey, who argued in 1937 that to “know precisely where the population is” is “to have gone a long way toward understanding the cultural geography of the region”,¹ most would agree that the population map is a fundamental document, provoking thought and leading the geographer to account for the patterns it reveals. In this sense, the maps that follow are the building blocks of a fuller interpretation of the evolving geography of pre-confederation New Brunswick. Like all maps, they are generalizations. The statistics from which they are compiled refer to a changing mesh of areal units. For the enumerations of 1785 and 1803, these units were described verbally in the most general terms; for the censuses of 1824, 1834, 1840, 1851, and 1861, civil parishes were the bases of data collection, but their number increased from 59 in 1824 to 117 in 1861, and their boundaries and areas were often adjusted.² Moreover, information about the distribution of population within parishes (or districts) is uneven in quantity and quality. Contemporary maps locate most towns, villages, and hamlets, and some of them chart the roads along which population spread. Travellers’ descriptions offer a more qualitative but revealing record of settlement patterns. For 1851 and 1861, manuscript census schedules allow more precise analyses of settler locations, but (as is also the case with the extensive land grant records) their use at the provincial scale is quite impracticable. Such difficulties are compounded, especially in those areas of particularly high or low population densities, by the necessity of aggregating the data for graphic representation. Inevitably, therefore, judgement and cartographic constraints have shaped the detailed patterns shown; within parishes and, on the earlier maps, districts, all distributions are approximations.

The following maps rest upon the best population data available for New Brunswick between 1784 and 1867 and form the first consistent map series treating population distribution in the province during this period. Yet they

* I wish to acknowledge the work of Paul Jance, Department of Geography, UBC, who drafted the maps.

1 D. Whittlesey, “Round Table on Cultural Geography”, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 27 (1937), p. 169. See also D.J.M. Hooson, “The Distribution of Population as the Essential Geographical Expression”, *Canadian Geographer*, 4 (1960), p. 12.

2 Graeme Wynn, “New Brunswick Parish Boundaries in the pre-1861 census years”, *Acadiensis*, VI (Spring 1977), pp. 95-105; W.F. Ganong, “A Monograph of the Evolution of the Boundaries of...New Brunswick”, Royal Society of Canada, *Proceedings and Transactions*, 2nd Series, 7 (1901), pp. 139-449.

suffer from a number of unavoidable short-comings. While the final return of those St. John River and Passamaquoddy settlers receiving the royal bounty of provisions in 1785, and the General Return of 1784 for the same area, probably provide a minimum estimate of the numbers of refugees and disbanded troops in the province's two main areas of Loyalist settlement,³ there was a great deal of geographical mobility among the Loyalists during their first years in the newly-created province, and the best of records could provide no more than a snapshot of a pattern in flux. Our most detailed information about population numbers and distributions at the turn of the century comes from the series of reports collected from important individuals in each district of the province by the prominent Loyalist Edward Winslow.⁴ Not all of these returns survive; the quality and accuracy of those that do varies greatly. Delay, confusion and administrative inadequacies rendered the 1861 New Brunswick return inconsistent and inaccurate; there is no reason to suspect that the province's four earlier censuses of 1824, 1834, 1840, and 1851 were any more precise.⁵ Nonetheless, for all their inadequacies, these maps chart the expansion of settlement during seventy-five years in which the New Brunswick landscape was transformed.

In 1780, New Brunswick was a forested land little altered by the hand of man. The region's indigenous people were primarily migratory hunters and fishermen and their numbers were small. In Passamaquoddy Bay and on the north shore, there were few signs of human occupation, but the 500 or so Acadians and twice as many English-speaking settlers at the head of the Bay of Fundy had had a greater impact upon the landscape. Fort Howe overlooked small settlements on either side of Saint John harbour, where grist and saw mills and several farms clustered about the stores of the Yankee traders Simonds, Hazen, and White, who had shipped locally produced lime, furs, and wood products (including masts and spars) to Nova Scotia and New England since the 1760s.⁶ In the

3 E.C. Wright, *The Loyalists of New Brunswick* (Moncton, N.B., 1972), pp. 249-50, 247-9. See also the "General Return of all the Disbanded Troops and other Loyalists who have lately become Settlers in the Provinces of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick...", Halifax, 4 November 1784, Thomas Carleton Papers, MG23 D3, Public Archives of Canada [PAC].

4 The surviving returns are in the Winslow Papers, University of New Brunswick Archives. Most of the information they contain appears in W.O. Raymond, ed., *Winslow Papers AD 1776-1826* (St. John, 1901), pp. 483-502, although as elsewhere Raymond's editing sometimes extended to the unacknowledged alteration of wording or the omission of phrases.

5 Alan A. Brookes, "'Doing the Best I Can': The Taking of the 1861 New Brunswick Census", *Histoire Sociale/Social History*, 9 (1976), pp. 70-91. The first five New Brunswick Censuses are published as appendices to the *Journals of the House of Assembly* of New Brunswick for 1825 (census of 1824), 1835 (1834), 1841 (1840), 1852 (1851), and 1862 (1861).

6 This paragraph depends upon various sources and represents a synthesis of disparate data. Among the more useful items are: T.W. Acheson, "A Study in the historical demography of a Loyalist County", *Social History/Histoire Sociale*, I (1968), pp. 53-65; W.A. Spray, "Early Northumberland County, 1765-1825; a study in Local Government" (MA thesis, University of

middle reaches of the St. John valley, commencing some 60 or 70 miles upstream, perhaps 1250 English-speaking settlers and 350 Acadians had established homes and farms. Nowhere were clearings very extensive or dwellings very elaborate. Even in the Maugerville area, where more attention had "been paid to . . . improvement and cultivation . . . than on all the other lands of the [St. John] River", little more than 20 per cent of the fertile intervale of Oromocto Island was cleared; only a handful of frame houses stood among the hundred or so log cabins on the south bank of the river.⁷

With the arrival of some 15,000 Loyalists in 1783, the population of the area more than quadrupled. In the ensuing months, many of the newly arrived departed; approximately 11,000 remained in 1785, most of them in the St. John Valley.⁸ In 1787, Surveyor General George Sproule's survey of the river between Fredericton and Madawaska traced a thin, broken ribbon of settlement along both its banks as far as Pine Island, a little above the present Woodstock.⁹ But occupation of these lands, originally reserved for disbanded regiments, was slow, and the majority of Loyalists remained downriver from Fredericton. Of the 1940 persons recorded in the 1785 return for Passamaquoddy more than half settled in the vicinity of present day St. Stephen and St. Andrews, where the Port Matoon, Penobscot, and Seventy Fourth Associations took up land. The short-lived Quaker settlement of Bellevue on Beaver Harbour had over 350 settlers in 1784, but declined in size thereafter. On the Magaguadavic River, the Royal Fencible Americans numbered approximately 200; the Cape Ann Association settlement north and east of the Port Matoon group was considerably smaller. A

New Brunswick, 1963); Graeme Wynn, "The Utilization of the Chignecto Marshlands of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, 1750-1800" (MA research paper, University of Toronto, 1969); R. Campbell, "Simonds, Hazen, and White: a study of a New Brunswick firm in the commercial world of the Eighteenth Century" (MA thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1970); "Return of the population of Portland Point and Conway in 1775 by James Simonds" in W.O. Raymond, *The River St. John* (Sackville, 1956), p. 279. See also Graeme Wynn, "The Assault on the New Brunswick Forest, 1780-1850" (PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 1974), pp. 10-18.

7 E. Foster, F. Dibblee, J. White, and G. Say, "Return to Major G. Studholme on settlement of Saint John River...", 30 June 1783, vol. 409, doc 15, Public Archives of Nova Scotia; J. Hannay, "The Maugerville Settlement 1763-1824", *New Brunswick Historical Society Collections*, I (1894), pp. 63-88; W.O. Raymond, ed., "Papers relating to townships on the Saint John River", *ibid.*, II (1905), pp. 287-356; Israel Perley's Survey Book and map of Maugerville and Oromocto Island 1787-1803, Ganong MSS Collection, Box 32, Pkt 1, New Brunswick Museum [NBM].

8 Wright, *The Loyalists*, pp. 107, 167, 211-14.

9 George Sproule, "Plan of the Communication by the River Saint John from Fredericton to the River St. Lawrence...July and August, 1787", NBM. See also his "Plan of the South West Part of New Brunswick including the River St. John as high up as the Great Falls", reproduced in Royal Society of Canada, *Proceedings and Transactions*, 2nd Series, 7 (1901), facing p. 412. B.D. Pilon, "The settlement and early development of the parish of Kingsclear, York County, 1783-1827" (MA thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1966), p. 13 shows that even in this area, near Fredericton, only 25 of 143 settlers listed in the initial allocation remained when the land was granted in 1799.

further two or three hundred refugees and disbanded troops were scattered along the banks of the lower St. Croix, Magaguadavic, and Digdeguash Rivers.¹⁰ Elsewhere, the Loyalist impact was comparatively slight. Many of those awarded grants on the Miramichi left almost immediately; possibly a hundred Loyalists (20-25 families) remained among a larger population of Acadians and English-speaking fishermen in 1785. The great majority of the 800 and more Loyalists mustered at Fort Cumberland in 1784 received lands in Nova Scotia; the hundred or so who settled in New Brunswick clustered in Sackville, and along the Petitcodiac and Memramcook Rivers, particularly at Dorchester.¹¹ Generally, the Loyalists settled along the province's larger rivers and it would not seem unreasonable to estimate an average of two cleared acres per Loyalist family for New Brunswick as a whole in 1785. Yet individual circumstances varied enormously. Several members of families prominent in the former colonies acquired large acreages in the lower and mid-St. John valley, and a few established moderately successful tenant farms, but most Loyalists lived on modest single-family farms.

At the turn of the century, the distribution of New Brunswick's 25,000 people was much the same as in 1785, although farms were more numerous and clearing had proceeded. By 1803, a million acres of Crown Land were under grant, and perhaps a thousand families occupied land without title to it. When General Martin Hunter came to the province in 1804, his wife recalled with pleasure the "many little well-cultivated spots on the river" between St. John and Fredericton, including "some with merely the wood burnt and not yet fallen down", and some that had just begun to be cleared.¹² Other visitors during this decade also noted the extensive fields of potatoes and buckwheat, the "considerable proficiency" of the farmers above Belleisle and the large numbers of sheep, cattle and horses on many of the farms.¹³ Everywhere the range in farm size was considerable. Farm sale advertisements in the provincial newspapers describe holdings with comfortable dwellings and extensive areas of intervale and cleared upland.¹⁴ Even in the more recently settled area of Woodstock, a prosperous, well-

10 Wright, *The Loyalists*, pp. 200-7; T.W. Acheson, "Denominationalism in a Loyalist County: A Social history of Charlotte 1783-1940" (MA thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1964); Return of persons settled at Passamaquoddy of the Cape Ann Association of Loyalists, 25 September 1785, REX/Pa Surveyor — General 1, 1783-1809, Statistics, Provincial Archives of New Brunswick [PANB].

11 Wright, *The Loyalists*, pp. 253-345; Colonel Robert Morse, "Report on Nova Scotia in 1784", PAC, *Report* (1884), p. xli.

12 Mrs. Hunter's descriptions of her journey from St. John to Fredericton, are cited in Lillian Maxwell, "Fredericton 1804-11", in MYO/H/76, PANB.

13 For example, G.O. Bent, "New Brunswick in 1802", *Acadiensis*, VII (1907), pp. 128-48.

14 *Royal Gazette* (Fredericton), 26 October 1803, 1 August, 7 November 1804; *St. John Gazette*, 6 April 1798.

organized farming community was established by 1803.¹⁵ Yet surveys taken at approximately the same period in Charlotte County, the St. John Valley and the northeastern areas of the province record many unimproved lots.¹⁶ In the settled areas across the St. John River from Fredericton there were approximately twelve acres of cleared land for each family. This is probably a fair average for the St. John valley as a whole. Elsewhere, beyond Chignecto, averages were generally lower. Overall, 60,000 acres seems a generous estimate of the cleared area of the province.

At the census of 1824 New Brunswick was home to 74,176 people. Settlement had spread up the St. John Valley to the Grand Falls and beyond. Below Woodstock numbers had also increased. Extensive Northumberland was the most populous county in the province, although overall population densities in this area remained low. Settlement was still largely confined to the banks of the rivers and larger streams, and farms varied enormously in size. As Alexander Wedderburn reported to an enquiry on 'emigration' in 1827, the amount of clearing varied "materially, according to the *internal* force of a family". To illustrate his point he noted the progress made by 27 families who had settled within a few miles of each other some five years earlier.¹⁷ Three had twenty to forty-five acres cleared; eleven had cleared between ten and twenty acres; and the remainder had fewer than ten acres of cleared land. Scattered evidence from other parts of the province suggests that this was a characteristic pattern. A number of farmers cultivated over thirty-five acres, but few had more than fifty acres of their land cleared.¹⁸ At most, there were 200,000 acres of cleared agricultural land in the province. On average this was little more than sixteen acres per family. For rural families the average was considerably higher; urban populations in St. John including Portland (perhaps 1,800 families), Fredericton (about 300 families), and the smaller Miramichi and St. Croix towns occupied relatively little land. Generally, too, cleared acreages were greater in the fertile St. John Valley and in Westmorland County than in Northumberland and Charlotte Counties.

By 1834, the provincial population was 119,457. New counties and parishes had been created; settlers had moved to unoccupied land in the older areas of settlement, and taken up new lands beyond the former limits. Although there

15 The Diary of the Reverend Frederick Dibblee of Woodstock, New Brunswick, 1803, NBM.

16 Surveys by Mercereau, Campbell, and Odell in RNA/C/4/3/5, PANB; "A General Report on the general list of applications for land in the County of Charlotte...July 1804", Miscellaneous Surveys, unclassified, PANB; Rev. Walter Price's Report on the Parish of St. Mary's, York County, 8 August 1803, in Raymond, *Winslow Papers*, pp. 497-8.

17 Alexander Wedderburn to Lt. Col. Cockburn, St. John, 1 May 1827, App (B) 1 of *Report of Lieutenant Colonel Cockburn on the Subject of Emigration*, laid before the Colonial Department, March 1828, Ganong Library, NBM.

18 Report of St. John Agricultural and Emigrant Society, encl. in Sir Howard Douglas to Wilmot Horton, 16 November 1826, CO 188/33.

was more cleared land, farms with over fifty acres available for cultivation were still unusual. According to the third provincial census, in 1840, a population of 156,162 had cleared approximately 436,000 acres. Less than 155 per cent of this total was in Northumberland, Kent, Gloucester, and Restigouche. Westmorland, with 99,000 acres cleared, remained the pre-eminent agricultural county but much clearing had also occurred in Kings (about 70,000 acres); Queens, York and Carleton (40,000 - 50,000 acres each); and Charlotte (35,000 acres). In 1840, Saint John and Portland together accounted for almost an eighth of the provincial population. Fredericton, with 4002 residents in 1840, was the only other urban area distinguished in the censuses of 1834 and 1840. Early in the 1830s, however, Newcastle had perhaps 150-200 houses (1000-1500 people) and nearby Douglastown was approximately a third as large. Chatham, with some 200 houses, included several mercantile establishments, a printing office, post office, reading room; and market hall; St. Andrews was a flourishing town of 2200; and St. Stephen had some 600 residents.¹⁹

At mid-century, 193,800 people lived in New Brunswick. Saint John and Portland accounted for almost a sixth of the total. Fredericton had grown by 10 per cent and remained the province's second city, but St. Andrews with upwards of 3,000 inhabitants and slightly smaller Chatham were important commercial centres of the second rank.²⁰ Approximately 640,000 acres of provincial land was cleared for cultivation, mainly in those districts identified for their agricultural importance earlier in the century. In much of the immediate hinterland of Saint John "the wildness of . . . [the] scenery . . . [was only] occasionally relieved by patches of cultivated land"; further upstream there were "thickly settled and well cultivated" lands, and Sheffield and Maugerville were to all appearances "the garden of the Province".²¹ Whereas less than 6 per cent of Westfield parish was cleared, over half the land in Woodstock and almost a quarter of that in Wakefield was capable of cultivation. But for thirty miles on each side of the Grand Falls the country consisted of "upland...well covered with softwood, rare clearings, little rich intervale land, and that chiefly at the mouths of the small streams which come into the St. John".²² Southwestern New Brunswick contained approximately ten per cent of the provincial population, most of whom lived on Passamaquoddy Bay and along the lower St. Croix River, where

19 R. Cooney, *A Compendious History of the Northern Part of the Province of New Brunswick and of the District of Gaspé in Lower Canada* (Halifax, 1832), pp. 107-11; T. Baillie, *An Account of the Province of New Brunswick with advice to Emigrants* (London, 1832), p. 112.

20 A. Monro, *New Brunswick, with a Brief Outline of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island* (Halifax, 1855), pp. 136, 204.

21 Edmund Ward, *An Account of the River St. John, with its tributary rivers and lakes* (Fredericton, 1841), pp. 20, 32; A. Gesner, *New Brunswick, with notes for emigrants* (London, 1847), pp. 146, 153.

22 J.F.W. Johnston *Notes on North America, agricultural, economical, and social* (Edinburgh, 1851), I, p. 70.

agriculture was secondary to lumbering and sawmilling. In contrast, the livelihood of Acadian and English-speaking settlers in the southeast of the province rested upon a diverse economic base. Although Westmorland remained “eminently an agricultural and grazing county”, its inhabitants also built ships, cut ton-timber, sawed lumber, and quarried gypsum and grindstone.²³ Along the Gulf shore and in the northeast, settlement was generally confined to the coast and the tidal reaches of the rivers; on the Bay Chaleur, Bathurst with perhaps five or six hundred people was the major town.

Reporting on the census of 1861, the compilers noted the evidence of “material progress” it provided.²⁴ The provincial population of 252,047 was 30 per cent greater than that of 1851. There was 37 per cent more land cleared and improved than a decade earlier; the hay cut was up 44 per cent; wheat, barley, and oat yields were 35, 27, and 88 per cent greater; livestock numbers were larger by 27 to 66 per cent; and so the litany continued. Yet the growth of the 1850s continued the pattern established earlier. Saint John and Portland still dominated the urban network, although they held a slightly smaller share of the provincial population. Fredericton remained the second city of New Brunswick. The 1400 inhabitants of Moncton Town were distinguished from residents of the larger parish by the census; other larger towns identifiable earlier had grown but were not set apart from their surrounding parishes in the published census returns. All counties were more populous than in 1851, although increases in Albert (50 per cent), Westmorland (42 per cent), Carleton (47 per cent) and Victoria (42 per cent), were significantly above the provincial average, those in Sunbury (14 per cent), Restigouche (17 per cent), and Charlotte (19 per cent) significantly below. The fringe of the forest had been pushed back, older settled districts were more densely occupied, but the essential lineaments of the settlement pattern resembled those of twenty-five and fifty years before: the distribution was basically peripheral, with fingers of settlement following the major valleys — especially the Miramichi, the Petitcodiac, the Kennebecasis and, most strikingly, the St. John — inland.

Indeed, the contrast between the New Brunswick of 1780 and that of 1860 was striking. Despite the setbacks of natural disasters and periodic downturns in the market for New Brunswick’s wood staple, a wilderness had been colonized. A sizeable population had found independence, and more had found homes, in the province. The vast majority were rural dwellers. In 1860 as in 1800, occupational pluralism was common, but almost everywhere in New Brunswick farms provided the bases of subsistence for provincial settlers. The overland movement of goods remained expensive; rivers and the sea were the main

23 M. Perley, “Report on the several counties of New Brunswick...”, New Brunswick, *Journal of the House of Assembly*, 1847, App., p. cxli.

24 C.A. Everett and J.S. Beek, “Compilers’ Report”, Census of the Province of New Brunswick, 1861, in New Brunswick, *Journal of the House of Assembly*, 1862, App., pp. 3-9.

arteries of long distance communication; lives were lived within familiar local horizons in this essentially pre-industrial environment. After 1861, the underpinnings of this pattern were fractured. Railroads reduced the friction of distance and brought imported goods into competition with local produce; subsistence farming and local manufacturing declined; with new technologies came industrial and urban concentration, farms were abandoned and the traditional mode of life they sustained faded. Even in 1861, the portents of such change were apparent. The first rail-lines in the province extended from Saint John to Shediac and northward from St. Andrews; manufacturers built new more extensive buildings to accommodate the steam engines that were becoming "so much more general"; the import of boots and shoes from the factories of New England had "materially affected" the New Brunswick manufacture of these goods in the 1850s; young men and women were already migrating from farms in some areas of the province.²⁵ After Confederation, the general progression and incremental expansion of New Brunswick settlement characteristic of the years before 1867 was interrupted. Although the provincial population reached 321,000 in 1881 and 408,000 in 1931 this growth was sporadic, it rested upon different foundations, and the patterns of population distribution revealed in the maps which follow were gradually made over.

GRAEME WYNN

²⁵ Everett and Beek "Compilers Report", p. 5.

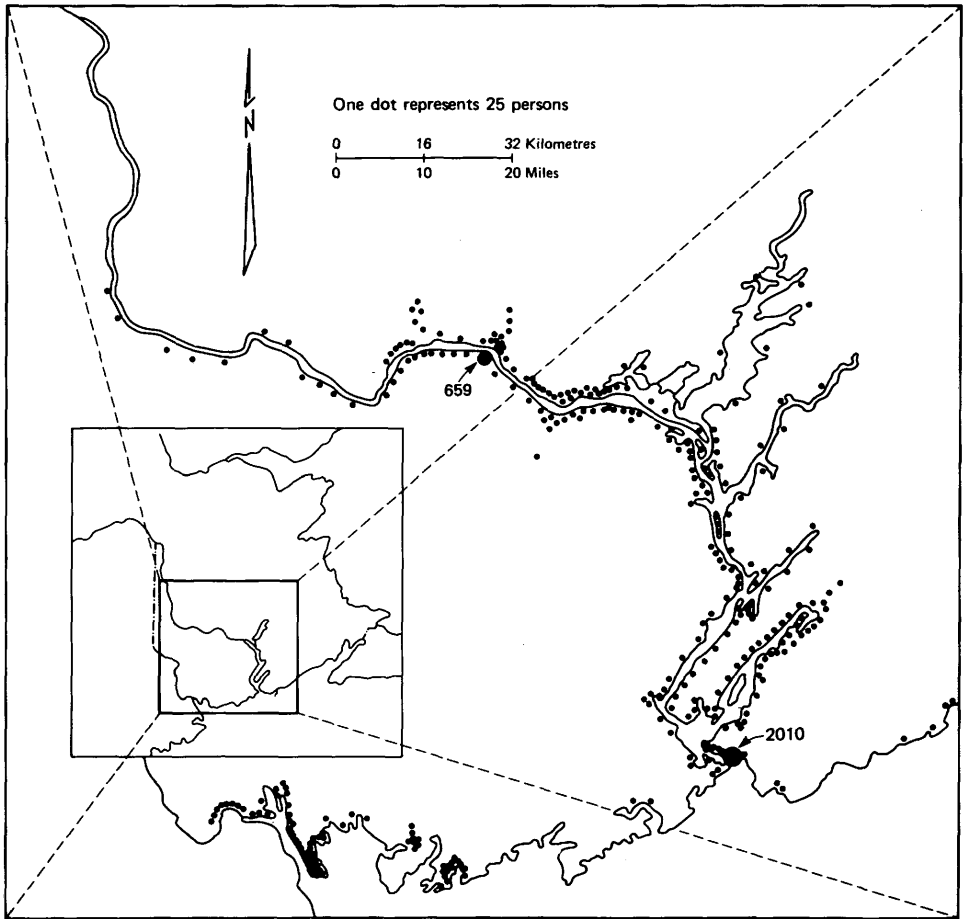


Fig. 1 St. John River and Passamaquoddy settlers receiving the royal bounty of provisions, 1785.

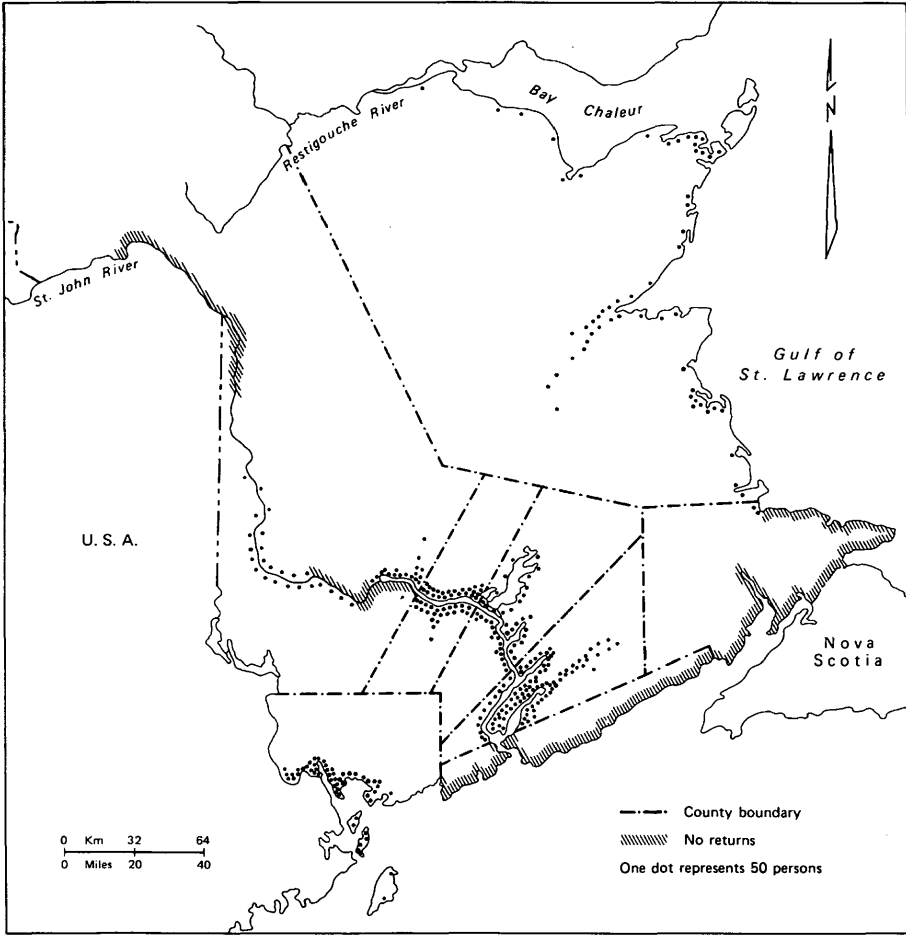


Fig. 2 Population distributions reported to E. Winslow, New Brunswick, 1803.

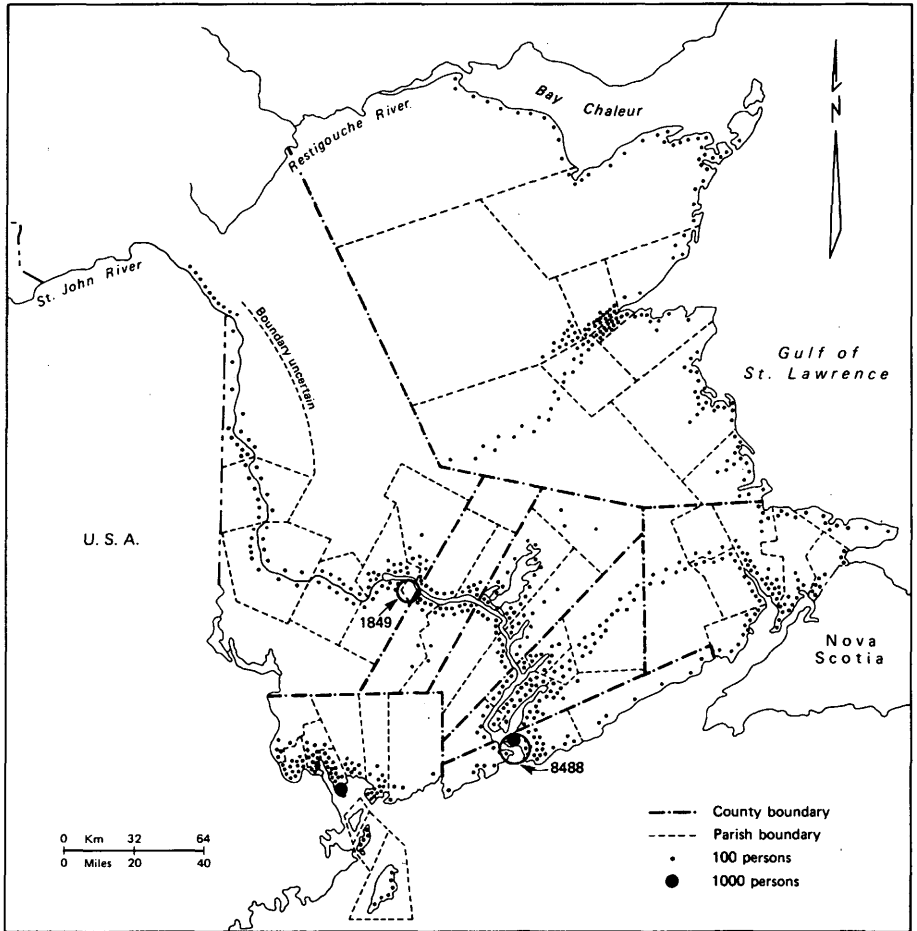


Fig. 3 New Brunswick population distribution, 1824.

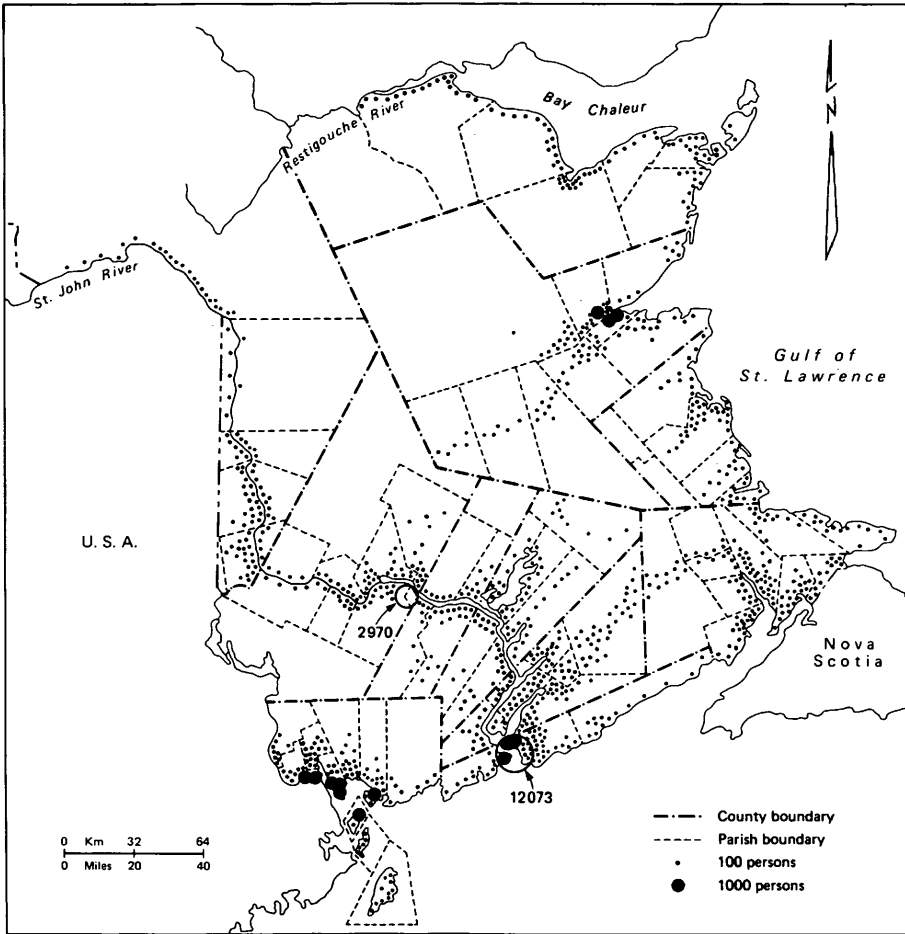


Fig. 4 New Brunswick population distribution, 1834.

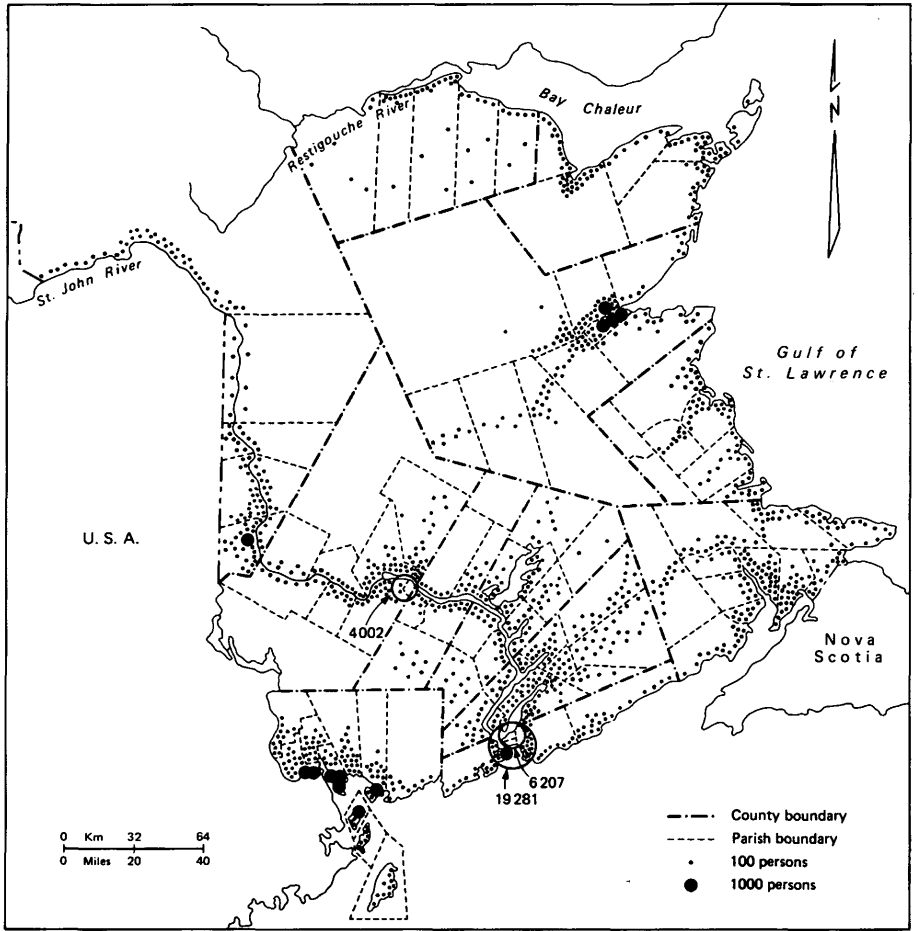


Fig. 5 New Brunswick population distribution, 1840.

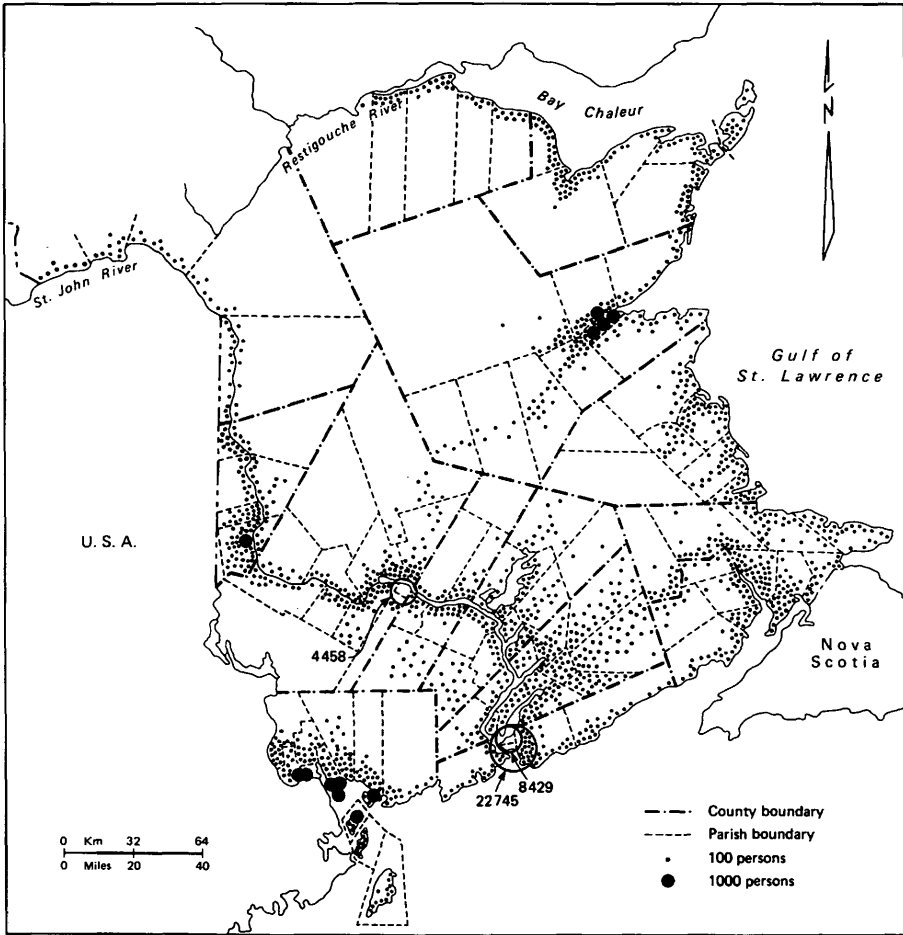


Fig. 6 New Brunswick population distribution, 1851.

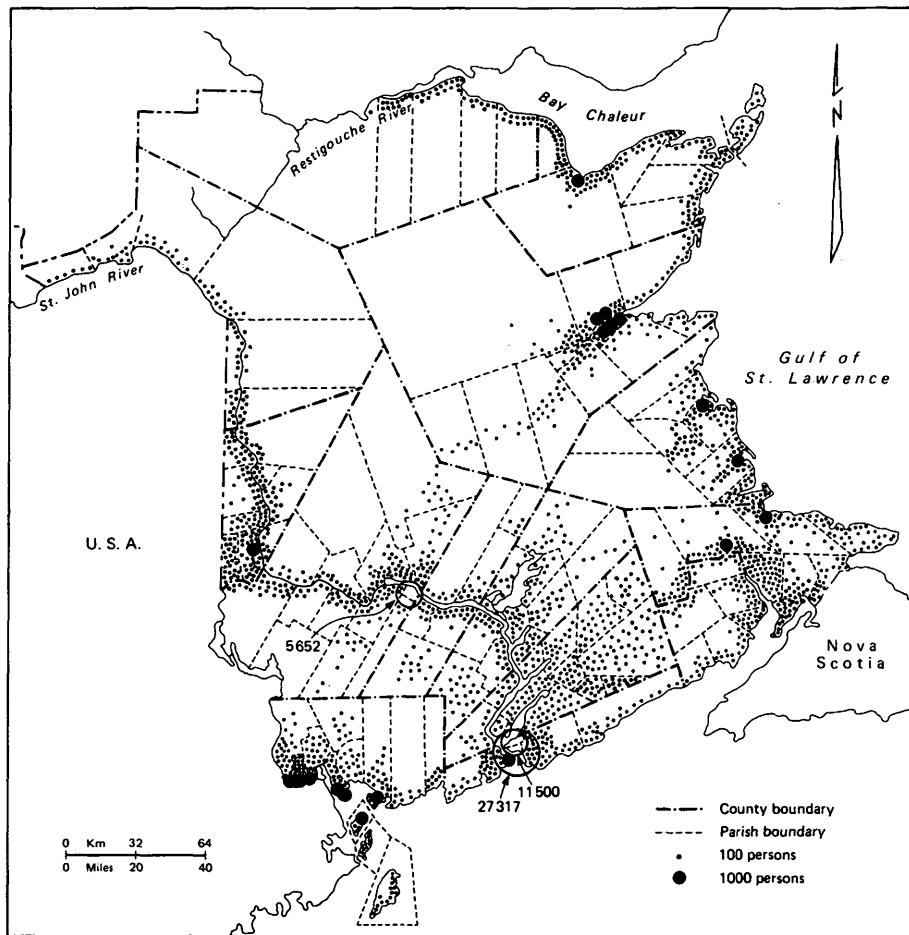


Fig. 7 New Brunswick population distribution, 1861.